

Hitchin Girls' School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117503
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	326629
Inspection date	5 November 2008
Reporting inspector	David Jones HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–19
Gender of pupils	Girls
Number on roll	
School (total)	1035
Sixth form	218
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Colin Minton
Headteacher	Mrs Frances Manning
Date of previous school inspection	28 November 2005
School address	Highbury Road Hitchin Hertfordshire SG4 9RS
Telephone number	01462 621300
Fax number	01462 621301

Age group	11–19
Inspection date	5 November 2008
Inspection number	326629

© Crown copyright 2008

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Further copies of this report are obtainable from the school. Under the Education Act 2005, the school must provide a copy of this report free of charge to certain categories of people. A charge not exceeding the full cost of reproduction may be made for any other copies supplied.

Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and one Additional Inspector. HMI invited the school to nominate a senior manager to join the inspection team for all aspects of their work; the headteacher elected to take this opportunity herself.

Inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: standards and achievement, the personal development of the students; and the quality of teaching and learning. Evidence was gathered from the school's data, students' work, lesson observations, meetings with school staff and students, the senior leadership team and governors. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified, and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

Larger than average and with a rising roll, the school contributes to a successful local sixth form partnership. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is average and the percentage of those who are learning English as an additional language is just below the national average. The catchment area includes the towns of Hitchin and Letchworth as well as a number of surrounding villages; social and economic variations are evident.

Attainment on entry to this non-selective girls' school is above average. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities or with a statement of special educational needs is below average. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is low. The school gained specialist science college status in 2004 and has since received national recognition in the following areas: Healthy Schools, Artsmark Silver, Sportsmark, the ICT Mark, and the Connexions Careers Education and Guidance award.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This is a good school with outstanding features; a sixth form student summed up the views expressed by many of the girls when she offered this comment, 'The support, care and education you get here is fabulous - we are a family.'

The personal development of the students is outstanding; the manner in which the girls respond to the staff and show respect for one another is very positive. Behaviour is outstanding. The girls' attitudes to learning are excellent and they often display a maturity beyond their years. The students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. The ethos of the school guides and influences the efforts of students, staff and governors. The school's promotion of community cohesion is outstanding with strengths in the students' understanding of the local, national and global dimensions. The school contributes significantly to the local extended services network.

The care, guidance and support the students receive is outstanding. The girls are very appreciative of the commitment shown by the staff who they note 'consistently do everything possible to support you'. The use of marking and assessment to inform teaching is good and academic mentoring is outstanding. Inspectors consistently observed small groups of staff and students engaged in animated subject or school community focused discussions. Procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements.

Overall, achievement in the main school is good and standards are exceptionally high. The provisional results of the national tests in 2008 for students aged 14 in mathematics and science are likely to be well above the national average. The teacher assessment outcomes for English indicate similar high-level results.

Overall, the 2008 GCSE results are well above the national average. The proportion of girls who obtained the national benchmark five A* to C grades that include English and mathematics was high, and increased by 10% to 83%. The school has been quick to identify that the most recent examination data indicates that, although the results secured by black and minority ethnic students were well above the national average, a group of students underachieved. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities made appropriate progress, although some students of average ability underachieved. However, 71% of students achieved nine higher grade GCSEs including English and mathematics, and one in four of the year group obtained nine A*/A grade GCSEs including English and mathematics. The numbers of students performing well in science and mathematics, two of the key areas within the school's specialism, are rising significantly. Results in English, particularly English literature, and in food technology have been a consistent strength for some years. However, results in some subject areas are more inconsistent.

The impact of the school's specialist science status is evident in the improvement in standards and the deployment of modern teaching resources across the curriculum. Following agreement within the local consortia, the school has offered specialist science and mathematics support to many of the primary schools within the local area. This successful school occupies historic buildings and teaching spaces are not always fit for purpose; facilities for physical education are a key constraint.

The quality of teaching and learning is good with some outstanding practice. The monitoring and evaluation of teaching is robust with a strong focus on teaching. Members of the senior and middle management teams were invited to accompany HMI in the joint observation of

teaching. The detailed analysis of learning, developed with inspectors, highlighted areas where the school's appraisal of the quality of learning can be further refined. The best lessons were well planned and engaged the students' attention at a number of different levels. Challenging questions and thoughtful practical activities were well paced. Teachers responded well to insightful and articulate comments from the students and good use was often made of homework. The formative comments and guidance provided by the best marking are very good.

Overall, curriculum provision is outstanding because of the wealth of opportunities developed through the local 14-19 consortia. However, in order to respond to the emerging requirements for secondary education, new courses are required in Key Stage 4 to equip students from this school with the key skills needed for the new diploma courses. Extra-curricular opportunities are outstanding; students were keen to comment that their opinions and ideas were valued and they were trusted to develop new ideas or run the well-established activities. Healthy lifestyles are the norm, the level of sporting participation and of competitive success is high and the quality of school catering was particularly impressive, winning plaudits from the students. The school prepares students for the next steps in their education very effectively.

Leadership and management are outstanding; they are good in all major respects and are exemplary in the promotion of the ethos of the school, the girl's academic success, the students' personal development and in the school's contribution to the community. Leaders and managers at every level provide clear direction. The restructured senior management team have raised standards in their first year and promote high quality care and education. Self-evaluation is accurate. The school's financial resources are effectively deployed; value for money is outstanding. Governance is outstanding; the care and attention to detail that was deployed in the recruitment of the recently appointed headteacher and other senior staff have proved very effective. Capacity to improve is outstanding.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Outcomes at A level and AS level are well above the national average, however, results at AS level have been declining slowly for four years. Numbers in the sixth form are rising and retention rates are high. The sixth form curriculum is outstanding because of the strength of the local area partnership, where a free flow of 16-19 students is very well managed between three schools and the local college. Sixth form teaching is effective and students were effusive in their praise for the care, welfare and academic guidance they receive from sixth form staff, notably so in the context of university entrance requirements. The new director of sixth form provides outstanding leadership and is conducting a well considered evaluation with the headteacher of the Key Stage 4 transition issues which are being highlighted by the AS outcomes. The outstanding behaviour and personal development of the students noted in the main school report owes much to the mature example and contribution of the sixth form students to whom the younger students respond very positively.

What the school should do to improve further

- Refine the monitoring and evaluation of provision to provide a greater focus on the quality of learning.
- Continue to develop the range of curriculum opportunities in the main school.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaints about school inspection', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall	16-19
---	-----------------------	--------------

Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	2	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well being?	1	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1	1

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	2	

¹Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

²IE - denotes that insufficient evidence was available to inspectors for a judgement to be made.

Personal development and well-being

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	1	
The attendance of learners	3	
The behaviour of learners	1	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	2	IE ²
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	1

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	1	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	2	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	1	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1	
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No	
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No	

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

6 November 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Hitchin Girls' School, Hertfordshire, SG4 9RS

It was a pleasure to meet so many of you when I led the inspection of your school just after the autumn half term. As the time available was particularly tight, your opinions were the dominant voice when we considered all aspects of the pastoral and academic care provided by the school. Many of you were full of praise for the way staff make time for you as individuals and younger students were quick to praise the contribution of senior girls to the extra-curricular opportunities you all value so highly. Thank you for your vital contribution to the inspection.

I am sure that most of you will read the full inspection report but in summary, the inspectors judged Hitchin Girls' to be a good school with a number of outstanding features. As I noted in the report, your personal development and the care, welfare and guidance you receive are outstanding. The curriculum opportunities provided within the consortia are outstanding but further adjustments are required in Years 10 and 11. Teaching and learning are good although I have asked the school to refine how it evaluates learning in order to eliminate some of the inconsistencies in achievement.

I must take this opportunity to offer my congratulations to the significant number of girls who did so well at GCSE in the 2008 examinations. I look forward to hearing about your future successes.

Yours sincerely

David Jones

Her Majesty's Inspector